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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002905

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [BA](#) [AE](#)  
SUBJECT: IRAQI REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT: UPWARD TREND

REF: BAGHDAD 2699

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Robert Ford for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The arrival of the UAE Ambassador to Iraq on September 4 - the first Arab Ambassador to return to Iraq in several years - and the apparently imminent posting of a Bahraini ambassador later this month provide a concrete demonstration that Iraq's engagement with its Arab neighbors -- on the uptick since early June -- is picking up pace. Other positive indicators: an Egyptian technical team visited August 18-21 to inspect prospective diplomatic sites, and reports that Kuwaiti PM Nasr Muhammad Ahmed al-Jabber plans to visit Baghdad in the next few weeks. End Summary.

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UAE Ambassador Arrives  
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¶2. (C) UAE Ambassador-designate Abdullah al-Shihi arrived in Baghdad September 4 with little advance notice or fanfare, becoming the first Arab ambassador to return to Iraq in recent years. Al-Shihi's surprise arrival was low-key: he traveled on commercial air accompanied only by a UAE security officer and an Iraqi national staffer, and was met at the airport by one working-level MFA Protocol officer. He presented his credentials to FM Zebari later the same day. Temporarily based at Al-Rasheed Hotel, al-Shihi told us September 8 that he plans to depart Baghdad on September 9 and return after Ramadan.

¶3. (C) Al-Shihi's first order of business was to finalize agreement with the GOI on the location of the UAE's new Embassy. On September 6, Al-Shihi and Iraqi MFA officials visited several villas in the Diplomatic Zone, just west of the USG's New Embassy Compound (NEC), some of which currently house USG personnel. According to senior MFA contacts, Al-Shihi and the MFA agreed on a specific property for the UAE Embassy (which is in good physical shape thanks to renovations performed by its USG-occupant). The MFA has requested that the U.S. vacate that property by October 1 so that it can become the UAE Embassy when Al-Shihi returns to Baghdad after Ramadan. (Note: A UAE technical team inspected the villas on August 31. End Note.)

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Bahrainis Not Far Behind  
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¶4. (C) Virtually at the same time as Al-Shihi's visit, Bahrain dispatched a seven-person technical team to Baghdad September 2-5 to view prospective Diplomatic Zone embassy sites as well. These included the same group of villas provisionally designated by the MFA for future embassies of key countries (reftel). Despite some logistical snafus that highlighted the Iraqi MFA's need to improve its operational capabilities, our understanding from both sides

is that the visit went well. Given recent reporting from Manama that Bahrain's newly named Ambassador-designate, Saleh Al-Maliki, intends to travel to Baghdad perhaps as soon as the week of September 14, we expect GOI-GOB negotiations on an embassy site to progress quickly.

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And Kuwaitis as Well  
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15. (C) Finally, recent press reports indicate that Kuwaiti PM Nasr Muhammed Ahmad al-Jabber intends to visit Baghdad after Ramadan. When queried on September 8, MFA contacts claimed no knowledge. (Note: In a sign that the MFA's record keeping on such matters still leaves room for improvement, one MFA contact said he would rifle through a pile of dipnotes to double check if they had missed something.) Bureaucratic confusion aside, the Iraqi-Kuwaiti agenda will be a bit more charged than that of the UAE or Bahrain. Parliament Speaker Mashadani complained at length to PolMinCouns on the evening of September 5 about alleged Kuwaiti condescension towards Iraq, claiming that Iraq had protected the Kuwaitis during the long war against Iran. The Iraqis want Kuwait to cancel their debt and resolve a long-standing dispute involving Iraqi Airways (IA) that recently led a Canadian court to approve seizure of interests in a new Bombardier aircraft commissioned

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by IA. (Conversely, the press reports Kuwait may raise compensation issues dating back to the 1990-1991 war.)

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Comment  
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16. (C) While the recent high-profile visits of UAE FM Abdullah bin Zaid (June 5), Turkish PM Erdogan (July 10), Lebanese Parliamentary bloc leader Sa'ad Hariri (July 17), Jordan's King Abdullah (August 12), and Lebanese PM Siniora (August 21) garnered more press attention, the UAE and Bahraini visits represent concrete as opposed to symbolic progress on Iraq's regional reintegration. Returning ambassadors to Baghdad and standing up embassies in the near future, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan are taking steps to establish more steady and normal relations with Iraq in the months ahead. As the MFA moves forward on assigning Diplomatic Zone villas, we will continue to try to encourage the Iraqis to play the central role, with the Embassy providing limited, temporary logistical help and other assistance to facilitate similar efforts by other key countries seeking to move in the same direction. The new (Sunni Arab) Minister of State for Foreign Affairs told us September 8 that he will focus his efforts after Ramadan on expanding ties with Arab countries, targeting Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait.

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